

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

The Clothes

Now listen. Listen up! I want Estrella
to come onstage with weeping all over her, every way
except tears: I want the weeping scurrying
inside her like bees in a rotted-out wall, or water
welling up in the ground that the city authorities categorize
as toxic: *that* kind of underground tears.
And more *squirrels!* Hey, some shmuck-of-a-gofer not doing
nothing—you! do you hear me, skinny?—get the squirrel man
to come to the squirrel delivery door
with a few more cages. Say sixteen. Augoosto:
walk more like a robot. No . . . no . . . *there!*
Maurice: I said mousse in your hair, but not a half-a-year
of cow-gunk from the Ganges River. Estrella: . . . no, wait,
Augoosto: clank clank clank! You got it,
boobeleh, Mr. Method Actor? Good . . . good . . . hotsy totsyt!
Estrella, pull at your gorgeous hair
like bell ropes in a tower
of weeping—that would be . . . *emblematic!* I want
to see your hands like rival suitors
crawling up Rapunzel's tumbled-down ladders of tresses.
No—no tears! You *be* the tears! Hey, you there
by the strobe light—get that puffer squirrel, yeah,
that one, good—and make him a little hat to wear
from one of the paper cups at the water dispenser, okay?
Yes, NOW; you're thinking, what, Christmas? One-two-NOW.
Estrella, pinch yourself. That helps the look I'm going for.
What, "where"? On your cheek, on that pillowy ass,
who cares, it should show in your *eyes*, like doleful tenants
looking out of your pupils and contemplating suicide.
You want *me* to do it? I didn't think so. Agatha,
you're the Designated Estrella Pincher whenever she waxes even
this close to gleeful. Now we'll . . . oh great,
stupid, you couldn't think to tie it onto his head
with a string or a rubberband or something? Do I *have* to
tell you *everything*? "Hi, I'm God, I just made you, now
I want you to start to breathe. NO
NOT THROUGH YOUR ASSHOLE STUPID!" . . . okay, see what I mean,
be independent-minded a little, there with your squirrel friend.
Ron, give strobe-light-boy here one of your chartreuse shoelaces
for the squirrel cap, please. Estrella, I . . . Ron,
I *said* "please." Okay. Good. Thank you. Look, I know



what I'm doing. I'd like you all on board with me,
 a . . . "community." On the same page.
 Listen, I'll tell you something . . . Augoosto, stop
 with the Frankenstein clomp for a minute, I'm going to tell you
 a story of how I got here, from when I was . . . oh, nineteen
 about. In college. That summer, I stole clothes from the laundromats.
 Don't laugh! It was easy. People would leave them
 spinning all day in those tumblers that look like
 astronaut training machines. They'd get a latté,
 walk the pooch, whatever, leaving me, *me*
 and their drying, aromatic, susceptible clothes. I said
don't laugh. I'd sit there listening to the zipper-click, gallumphing
 pursuit of a flock of chemise by a pair of painter's overalls,
 I'd look at the lacy what-nots opening up
 like delicate graceful lusty jellyfish: hoo-boy! But I don't mean
 this casual thievery was sexual . . . I'd take a parka
 as readily as a frothy thong. It wasn't economic:
 I could afford clothes of my own. It was . . . well, how can a man
 who has chatted with emirs and Pulitzer cockamamie writers
 put it? . . . it was here a fluffing hoodie, there
 a pair of jalapeño-and-sombrero-thematized boxers . . . and,
 once I possessed them, I possessed the lives
 behind them. I'd scoop them up with a true nonpartisan eagerness,
 I was a Whitman, I was a libertarian, I . . . Maurice,
 if I wanted you idly molding your gooey locks
 into tiny prairie dogs popping out of your head
 I'd have said so. All of you: quit your smirks! That childish snarky
 pinpoint subcutaneous invidiousness will *not* do
 this production a firefly-buttock's glimmer of good. Okay.
 Are we quiet, comported adults now? Well, we'd better be,
 you goosey palookas. Stow the squirrel in that gym bag for now.
 Where was I? . . . Agatha, what?—for chrissake surely
 you'll donate a stinking broken-down gym bag to the cause
 of theatrical history. If there's even a *hint* of squirrel-doo
 I'll buy you a new one, deal? Where was I? . . . okay. One day
 I was at my hobby—not a "fetish," maybe a "compulsion"—and
 after I'd snatched some jeans or a bra or who-knows now
 a-hundred-and-ninety years later, I lifted a woman's jersey
 out of that sweet warm lottery drum, a jersey, tattered and pink
 in the way
 that told you it must have been a cherry-red at some time,



long before the use, and the need for thrift, with grease stains on the front of it that would never erase completely if you laundered it against rocks in a village stream for decades, and I held it, I *imbibed* it, I was a vampire of its warmth, and I knew, I *knew* how the woman who owned it was a version of that pink: worn down from something louder and more attractive earlier. I *loved* her. I wanted to *be* her.

Then you know what?—you, by the rubber rocks, if I catch you rolling your heehaw eyes again while I’m talking, you’re never even serving fries in this city, got it?—anyway, you know what? I was right about her. I say that for sure because oh god suddenly there she was in the door, with a cop she’d brought, and I was caught *red-handed*. Agatha, what? Just say it, if you can mutter it to Maurice you can say it to me. What? Very funny, “pink-handed.” Now may I continue, klutzes and kvetchers? Thank you. I was caught, and the cop was breathing “jail time” all over the room, and I saw my tush in a downtown lock-up mildewing there for lack of friend and finance, and . . . you’ve heard of *inspiration*? Like a million little pickle-forks of lightning from the blue, it came to me, and I said to him, “Officer, I’m directing a school play. Really! I’m sorry! This is what we *do*, we need to understand a stranger’s life, and make it *real*,” boohoo, boofreakin’ hoo, etc. etc., and the woman *bought it*. The woman believed it! She what’s-the-word? She “interceded.” It worked. You know why it worked? Augoosto, clodhopper, put down your hand: this isn’t Blessed Sacrament second grade. You know why it worked? Because (and I hadn’t known myself until that moment) it was True! I *am* a Director, and this *is* What We Do! And you, my dears and doofuses, my mollycoddled darlings, you can stand there in your solipsism impatiently waiting for all of this foofoo jibberjabber to dribble and die, but I tell you there are nights I’ve walked the slipstream and the suckhole of the Sea of Doubt, I’ve gone down to the edge of the Fires, insomniac, crazy for wanting to know about life in its germ, in its animal howl, in its pitiful limited human warranty, and I’ve looked up to the gods we’ve speckled in burning and rumpus across the sky and I’ve *been* them for a drunk unsteady moment, I’ve seen the universe through their omnifaceted eyes, and I’ve looked downward into the Valley where the promise of dawn and the lingering fumes of rush hour traffic commingle, and here I’ve taken to myself the entire

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wraparound scene of false teeth, gun oil, shining coins
of orgasm as they're flipped through the body, cellphone zap,
Talmudic esoterica, small used-up tubes of anal lube,
our chopsticks and our logarithms,
prom dress, breath mint, carbon footprint, taxidermied wolverine,
kachina doll of the pollen spirits, mistress of contrition
as well as queen of the midnight boogaloo club,
our swarms of hopes as they glitter and either fail or catch
and flame, our tiny turbocharged ambitions and our darkest
nests of intertwining fears, I've taken it all to myself
and been more than myself, or less than myself, directing
the Heavens, directing the Pit, can we do something
about these fucking squirrels in here, they're driving me crazy!
Who requisitioned these fucking squirrels! Estrella,
trust me: lighten up.